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Message Text

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ACTION ARA-14

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 NSAE-00 NSCE-00
SSO-00 USIE-00 INRE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-07 L-03
PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 COME-00 EB-08 LAB-04
SIL-01 A-01 OPR-02 SY-05 OC-06 CCO-00 MCT-01
AID-05 PC-01 /084 W
----------012423 081310Z /43
O 072221Z SEP 77
FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3636

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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: ELAB,HUH/, CO
SUBJECT: GENERAL STRIKE TIKELY FOR SEPTEMBER 14

1. SUMMARY. COLOMBIAN TRADE UNION MOVEMENT, INCLUDING THE COMMUNIST AND DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERATIONS, HAS CALLED A 24- HOUR NATIONAWIDE GENERAL STRIKE FOR SEPTEMBER 14. WHILE THE STRIKE POSES NO THREAT TO THE STABILITY OF THE GOVERNMENT, SOME VIOLENCE CAN BE EXPECTED. END SUMMARY.

2. COLOMBIA'S TWO DEMOCRATIC TRADE UNION CONFEDERATIOS, THE UTC ANF THE CTC, APPEAR SET TO ESTABLISH AN HISTORIC FIRST FOR THIS COUNTRY WHEN THEY JOIN FORCES WITH TWO LEFT WING CONFEDERA-TIONS TO STAGE A 24-HOUR NATIONWIDE GENERAL STRIKE SEPTEMBER 14. ISSUES BASICALLY INVOLVE UNIO DEMANDS FOR GOC ACTIONS TO RELIEVE INFLATIONARY PRESSURES ON WORKERS, AS INFLATION RATE THUS FAR THIS YEAR APPROACHES 30 PERCENT LEVEL. UNION DEMANDS INCLUDE 50 PERCENT INCREASE IN MINIMUM WAGE, AND IMPLEMENTATION OF 1959 LAW WHICH WOULD AUTOMATICALLY TIE ALL WAGES TO COST OF LIVING FIGURES. ACCORDING TO UNION OFFICIALS, GOC REACTIONS TO ORIGINAL PETITIONS AND IN SUBSEQUENT TOP-LEVEL MEETINGS HAVE BEEN UNIFORMLY NEGATIVE,WITH GOC OFFICIALS MAINTAINING THEY
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CANNOT DECREE WAGE INCREASES AND THAT ANY SIGNIFICANT WAGE INCREASES WOULD FUEL INFLATION.

3. UNION SOURCES TOLD THE EMBASSY THAT THE TWO DEMOCRATIC GROUPS DECIDED TO TAKE LEADERSHIP OF COST OF LIVING PROTEST AFTER LIVING COSTS HAD REACHED POINT THAT PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR SOME TYPE OF PROTEST WAS OVER WHELMING. UNIONS ALSO FELT THEY HAD TO

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ASSUME LEAD IN ORDER TO KEEP LEFT WING UNIONS FROM EXPLOITING SITUATION AGAINST DEMOCRATIC UNIONS. IN DISCUSSIONS WITH THE LEFT, IT WAS AGREED THAT POLITICAL DIFFERENCES WOULD BE SET ASIDE SO THAT COORDINATED EFFORT COULD BE MADE TO ASSIST WORKERS. DEMOCRATIC UNION LEADERS SEE THIS AS A POSSIBLE FIRST STEP TOWARDS FUTURE JOINT ACTION PROGRAMS WHICH WOULD BE LIMITED TO NON-POLITICAL ISSUES AIMED AT STRENGHTENING THE LABOR MOVEMENT. UTC AND CTC LEADERS, APPARENTLY MISCALCULATING GOC REACTION, HAD HOPED TO NEGOTIATE BULK OF DEMANDS WITH GOC AND THUS AVOID A STRIKE, BUT NEGOTIATIONS WERE UNSUCCESSFUL. DEMOCRATIC UNIONS ARE NOW IN A POSITION WHERE THEY MUST FOLLOW THROUGH WITH COORDINATED STRIKE OR FACE SEVERE LOSS OF PRESTIGE WITH RANK AND FILE, AND WITH GOC.

4. UNIMN LEADERS RECOGNIZE THEY FACE RISKS IN THIS JOINT ACTION, AND THAT THEY CAN EXPECT LITTLE FROM THE GOC IN THE WAY OF IMMEDIATE ECONOMIC GAINS, BUT THEY SEE NO OTHER COURSE OF ACTION AT THIS TIME. THEY BELIEVE STRIKE WILL BE SUCCESSFUL IF THEY CAN SHOW GOC AND THE PUBLIC THAT UNION MOVEMENT SHOULD BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY AS AN ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL FORCE IN COLOMBIA. THIS SUCCESS WILL DEPEND ON AN ORDERLY 24-HOUR GENERAL WORK STOPPAGE SUPPORTED BY THE BULK OF THE ORGANIZED AND UNORGANIZED WORKERS. UNION LEADERS PREDICT THAT THE MAJORITY OF WORKERS WILL SUPPORT THE STRIKE, AND SERVICES SUCH AS TRANSPORTATION AND TELECOMMUNI-CATIONS WILL BE AFFECTED. IN ORDER TO DECREASE LIKELIHOOD OF VIOLENCE BETWEEN WORKERS AND SECURITY FORCES, ONE UNION OFFICIAL
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REPORTED THAT UTC AND CTC LEADERS WILL PRIVATELY URGE THEIR MEMBERS TO SUPPORT THE STRIKE BY STAYING HOME, AND NOT TO TAKE PART IN DEMONSTRATIONS WHICH MIGHT TURN VIOLENT. HE ADDED THAT LEFT WING UNIONS ARE EXPECTED TO USE SITUATION TO CONFRONT SECURITY FORCES, WITH SOME VIOLENCE ANTICIPATED. GOC HAS ISSUED SPECIAL DECREES CALLING FOR JAILING OF ANY PERSON LEADING OR TAKING PART IN AN ILLEGAL STRIKE, AND FORBIDDING RADIO AND TELE-VISION REPORTING OF STRIKE PLANS OR ACTIVITIES. THIS HARD-LINE ATTITUDE IS EXPECTED TO CONTINUE, AND UNION LEADERS INDICATE THEY ARE PREPARED TO SUFFER THE CONSEQUENCES OF THEIR ACTIONS.

5. UNION SPOKESMEN NOTE THAT HUMAN RIGHTS ARE ALSO AN ISSUE, PARTICULARLY BECAUSE OF THE GOC'S THREAT OF LARGE SCALE ARRESTS OF UNION LEADERS AND STRIKING WORKERS. REPRESENTATIVES OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS INTERESTED IN HUMAN RIGHTS ARE REPORTEDLY PREPARING TO MONITOR STRIKE AND GOC REACTIONS.

6. COMMENT: UNION LEADERS APPEAR SURPRISED BY STRONG, PATERNAL-ISTIC STAND TAKEN BY PRESIDENT LOPEZ. THEY OBVIOUSLY HAD EXPECTED MORE CONCILIATORY ATTITUDE FROM A LIBERAL PRESIDENT, WHICH WOULD HAVE ALLOWED THEM TO DEFUSE THE SITUATION WITHOUT HAVING TO ACTUALLY TAKE PART IN A UNITED FRONT WITH THE LEFT.

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THE SITUATION COULD STILL ALTER WITH THE SEPTEMBER 10 MEETING
OF THE NATIIONAL SALARY COUNCIL TO CONSIDER INCREASING THE MINIMUM
WAGE, BUT IT WOULD APPEAR THAT THE LINES HAVE HARDENED TO THE
POINT WHERE THE STRIKE WILL TAKE PLACE AS PLANNED. WHILE A
24-HOUR STOPPAGE POSES NO THREAT TO THE STABILITY OF THE GOVERN-
MENT, VIOLENCE WHICH IS LIKELY TO OCCUR COULD SERIOUSLY DAMAGE
RELATIONS BETWEEN GOC AND THE DEMOCRATIC UNIONS, AND THEREBY
BENEFIT THE LEFT WING GROUPS. IF THE STRIKE CAN BE RESTRICTED
TO THE 24-HOUR TIME FRAME, AND THE AMOUNT OF VIOLENCE LIMITED,
THE DEMOCRATICE UNIONS CAN CLAIM TO HAVE BEEN SUCCESSFUL IN THEIR
COORINATED EFFORT WITH THE LEFT; AND THIS COULD OPEN THE DOOR
TO FUTURE JOINT ACTIONS. THIS DEPENDS, HOWEVER, ON THE WILLINGNESS
OF THE LEFT TO LIMIT THEIR GOALS IN ORDER TO BUILD CLOSER TIES
TO THE DEMOCRATIC UNIONS, AND THEIR ABILITY TO CONTROL EXTREMISTS
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(INCLUDING STUDENTS AND OTHERS NOT ASSOCIATED WITH THE LABOR
MOVEMENT) WHO ARE LIKELY TO USE THE OPPORTUNITY TO CONFRONT THE
GOVERNMENT THRO/# ;89)3,:3. ALTHOUGH UNION LEADERS STRONGLY
REJECT IDEA THAT THE STRIKE IS POLITICAL IN NATURE, THEIR ALLIES
ON THE LEFT MIGHT WELL SEE THE SITUATION IN A DIFFERENT LIGHT,
AND ON THIS DEPENDS THE SUCCESS OF THIS ALLIANCE. END COMMENT.

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01-Jan-1994 12:00:00 am
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: LABOR RELATIONS, GENERAL STRIKES
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Sent Date: 07-Sep-1977 12:00:00 am
Decaption Date: 01-Jan-1960 12:00:00 am
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1977BOGOTA08374
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: N/A
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D770325-0511
Format: TEL
From: BOGOTA
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1977/newtext/t19770992/aaaaczvl.tel
Line Count: 144
Litigation Code IDs:
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Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: a546034d-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION ARA
Original Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
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Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 1370685
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: GENERAL STRIKE TIKELY FOR SEPTEMBER 14
TAGS: ELAB, CO
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkvgwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/a546034d-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
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